

Coming out of Violence

Essays on
Ethnicity,
Conflict
Resolution
and
Peace Process
in
North-East
India

Edited by
Monirul Hussain

This volume is an outcome of collective endeavour aimed at understanding the issues of emerging ethnicity, conflict resolution and peace processes in India's sensitive North-East, comprised of seven states i.e. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Perpetual ethnic conflicts and their resultant violence have severely affected the society, polity and economy of the region during the entire post-colonial period beginning with the rebellion of the Nagas in early fifties of the 20th century. Both in qualitative as well as in quantitative terms, the conflicts and violence have increased significantly over the years. In the process, conflicts have become largely institutionalised and paved the way for emergence and continuity of low intensity wars within the territory of the same nation-state. Conflicts are not only confined to the state and the insurgents alone, it goes far beyond the conventional discourse of simplistic conflicts to a much more complex set of conflicts wherein various insurgent groups fight one another besides, sometimes, they fight against the society to which they belong. This brings to the fore the role of civil society as a mediator between the two disputants in the conflicts i.e. the state and the insurgents/ ethnic movements. This collective academic exercise is aimed at analysing some of the existing conflicts, exploring the possibilities of resolving such long-drawn conflicts and paving the way for peace in North-East India.

This volume is a cornerstone resource for a wide range of institutions and individuals concerned with problems of North-East India. This will attract the attention of students and scholars of ethnicity, conflict resolution, peace and security studies.

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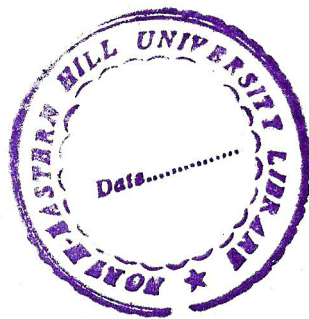
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Peace Process in North-East India



Edited by
Monirul Hussain
Gauhati University



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12th January, 2005

FOREWORD

The violence in the North-East has quite unsurprisingly defied any unitary solution. It raises questions on many fronts: questions about the quality of our nationhood, about the idea of a community and allegiance to a community, about intercommunity relationships, about diversity of traditions, about the narrow instrumentalist thinking which determines political initiatives, about "development" and the frequently invisible violence implicit in the development process, about cultural domination and coercion and many others. For the political and social theorist it is fertile ground for fresh insights, for the political pragmatist it offers challenges which are unprecedented, for the insider it throws up frequently unwelcome but inevitable problems of *critical* articulation, and for the outsider problems of raising the veils of deception generated by the urge for "objectivity". The papers carefully put together for this volume by Monirul Hussain raise some of these questions and will, I am sure, prove to be essential reading for anyone interested in a serious intellectual articulation of the human predicament of the North-East.

Mrinal Miri

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume is an outcome of a collective academic endeavour aimed at understanding the emerging ethnicity, prospects of resolving the ethnic conflicts and building peace in North-East India. The papers included here were originally presented at a two day national seminar on *Coming out of Violence: Resolving Ethnic Conflicts in North-East India* held on 11th and 12th November 2002 at the Department of Political Science, Gauhati University. The seminar was sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, North-Eastern Regional Centre (ICSSR-NERC), Shillong.

In preparing an edited volume, I suppose, one accumulates quite a few debts to professional colleagues and institutions involved in the project. I must thank Professor Mrinal Miri, Vice-Chancellor of the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong and the Chairman of the ICSSR-NERC, Shillong for his encouragement, involvement and keen interest shown in holding the seminar. Dr. G.N. Talukdar, Vice-chancellor, Gauhati University (GU) was a constant source of inspiration for the Department of Political Science in organising the seminar. Dr. Talukdar, inaugurated the seminar. Both the ICSSR-NERC and the GU offered excellent cooperation and all institutional support required for holding the seminar efficiently. The ICSSR provided financial assistance and the GU provided the logistics. I am grateful to both of them. We are also grateful to two well-known scholars i.e., Professor Imtiaz Ahmad of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and Professor Hiren Gohain, Former Dean, Faculty of Arts and Professor at the Department of English, Gauhati University for delivering the keynote address and the valedictory address respectively. Prof. Ahmad's keynote address has been added to this volume. Professor David Reid Syiemlieh, the then Honorary

Director of ICSSR-NERC, was the guest of honour in the inaugural function of the seminar. He too took keen interest in the seminar. I am indebted to him. My esteemed colleagues in the department, Prof. Niru Hazarika, Prof. Kunja Medhi, Prof. Anuradha Dutta, Dr. Sandhya Goswami, Dr. Alaka Sarma, Mr. Nani Gopal Mahanta, Mr. Akhil Ranjan Dutta and Dr. Dhruva Pratim Sarma, research scholars Ms. Mausumi Pathak, Ms. Sumana Das, Ms. Sanghamitra Nath, Ms. Barnalee Choudhuri, Ms. Sanghamitra Baruah, Rabiul Islam Mollah and my many wonderful postgraduate students helped me immensely in holding the seminar. I acknowledge their help and cooperation.

Primary acknowledgement for contributions in the publication of this work must go, of course, to the dedicated professionals who authored them. There is very little monetary reward and academic glory from this kind of authorship; it must be and obviously was a labour of love and dedication to the craft of teaching, research and dissemination of knowledge and information to wider society much beyond the walls of the university. I am deeply indebted to all the fellow contributors; they have made this volume possible.

Lastly, I must thank Dr. C. Joshua Thomas, the Director of ICSSR-NERC, Shillong for his help and cooperation much beyond his official duty. He kindly volunteered to share a large part of my burden as the director of the seminar as well as the editor of this volume.

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INTRODUCTION

Monirul Hussain

Perpetual ethnic conflicts and their resultant violence have severely affected the society, polity and economy of North-East India during the entire post-colonial period beginning with the rebellion of the Nagas in the tiny hill district of Naga Hills under the undivided state of Assam. The first significant ethnic conflict between the Nagas and the Indian state emerged soon after India became independent. Both in quantitative as well as qualitative terms, the conflicts and violence have increased over the years without any sign of abnegation. Hence, the conflicts have become some what institutionalised, and have propelled a peculiar kind of parallel polity unique to this region. Such kind of development has led to a complex web of relatively enduring conflict situation between the insurgents and the state on one hand, and between/ among the communities in question on the other. Additionally, such development has also led to conflicts between the insurgents and the society to which they belong. Sometimes even the various insurgent groups fight one another. Hence, such conflicts are not confined to the state and affect the insurgents alone as projected in the media. It goes far beyond that conventional discourse of simplistic conflicts to a much more complex set of conflicts in the region. The present academic exercise is aimed at analysing some of the existing conflicts, exploring the possibilities of resolving such conflicts and paving the way for peace in North-East India. Needless to say this has been a collective endeavour of scholars who have been concerned with the problem of ethnic conflicts and

conflict resolution. This includes scholars from inside as well as from outside the region. This volume has its genesis in an ICSSR sponsored national seminar organised by the Department of Political Science, Gauhati University in November 2002.

In this volume, we have included fifteen papers in total, including this introductory chapter. The first chapter introduces the problems and issues related to ethnicity, conflict resolution and peace building in North-East India, it also introduces the present collection of papers. The next four papers deal mainly with the conceptual aspects of the problem and the remaining papers deal with the empirical situation and specific cases of ethnic/insurgent conflicts in North-East India.

In his paper "Understanding Ethnicity and Conflict Resolution", Imtiaz Ahmad opines that the world today, especially the third world countries, can see a massive intensification and proliferation of ethnic, communal and linguistic conflicts. There has been massive multiplication of ethnic conflicts mainly because of incomplete modernisation. However, conventional responses, viz., repression and militarisation, concessions to the ethnic minority by the state, use of mass media, etc., have not had the desired effect in recent years. On the contrary, conflicts have emerged with renewed force. The author focuses on the causes of conflict with the aid of relevant queries and identifies economic, political and social discrimination, resistance to political integration and international intervention as the triggering factors. At one point of time, the author even considers partition of multi-ethnic states into smaller but homogeneous units as a solution but soon brushes it off as this cannot be a solution in the long run. To support his argument, he elucidates the example of India and Pakistan where even after partition there is no respite from Hindu-Muslim conflicts. However, for a possible solution there is the need for greater sensitivity to the economic, political, social and linguistic concerns of ethnic minorities in state policy even in normal times. Secondly, defamatory propaganda about cultural and linguistic resistance as well as repressionist policies may aggravate the situation and therefore, to be avoided. Lastly, there is an urgent need for moving towards decentralisation and since centralisation has been necessitated by the process of modernisation, there is a need to understand and question the imperatives of modernising itself.

"Civil Society and the Struggle for Self-Determination in Contemporary North-Eastern India," a paper by Samir Kumar Das, focuses on North-East India which has been rocked by various forms of struggle for self-determination. The agenda of reconstructing the civil society has acquired a new and hitherto unrecognised importance. The romantic belief that it is only through intense and sustained struggle for self-determination that a civil society can take shape and draw strength continues to cast its spell on our minds. This paper re-examines the connection between these struggles for self-determination and the emergence of civil society with special reference to North Eastern region and argues that civil society does not spontaneously emerge in course of these struggles.

Gurudas Das in his paper 'Small Societies in Large Democracy: Problem of Conflict Resolution in India's North-East' brings to the fore the question of smaller ethnic minorities in a large democracy like India. As the democratic voice of the ethnic minorities of the North-East fail to reach the centre of India's large democracy, the smaller ethnic groups very often use violence as a political mode of communication in order to assert themselves vociferously. This comes as a result of the non-fulfilment of their aspirations as most of the time, the conflict resolution mechanism is largely biased in favour of the majority group in a poly-ethnic society. The author draws example from the ethnic Assamese and Naga assertions. These groups stand as a majority in a particular politically autonomous space but may find themselves in a minority position in a larger political framework of the Indian democracy. As the power rests with the federal government at the centre, these otherwise majority groups cannot redress their political issues. These ethnic groups are no way in a position to influence the federal decision-making process even if they change their voting behaviour. As a result of all these, the ethnic groups find violence as the ultimate means to influence the decision-making process in their favour. As in the case of Assamese and Nagas to India is, so are the cases of the Bodos in Assam, Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh, and Reangs in Mizoram etc. However, Das observes that ripple effects of such movements are hardly felt at the centre of the nation due to the fact that these ethnic groups are located at the periphery of the nation-state. Hence, be it a local/sub-regional/regional movement, the outcome is more or less the

same. The author substantiates further by trying to locate the probable reasons behind such behaviour of the state/government towards conflict resolution. The state/government normally reacts only after these movements turn violent. Das also points out to developing a working formula for inter-segmental co-operation and secondly, the state has to play a pre-emptive role. Instead of allowing a movement to grow violent and then react to it.

In her paper "Resolving Ethnic Conflicts in the North-East: A Pacifist Approach", Kunja Medhi attempts to provide a solution towards resolving ethnic issues in the region through a pacifist approach, drawing examples from history. The author considers conflict, violence and war as completely psychic events with their roots in the minds of people. Gandhian solution seems to be the only alternative against hatred and revenge according to the author. People who take the non-violent path need not feel helpless; on the contrary peace in the world could be wrought only when rich and powerful countries decide to disarm themselves. According to her, solution to violence is to be found within the Gandhian discourse of peace and morality.

Anuradha Dutta in her paper "Women as Peacemakers: A Case Study of North-East India," attempts to focus on the fact that women have been traditionally denied political influence both in terms of national security and peace process. Exclusion of women from peace process can also be termed as an act of oppression. The state in its security measures ignores social structure, people's movements, marginalised groups and non-state actors. Women's experience of providing day-to-day human security gives them an integrated perspective on what constitutes security and how to bring about peace. Despite such exclusion, various women groups have been contributing towards peace process in their own way, especially in the rural areas of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland since the colonial times. There is a need for opening up this closed space where peace keeping and security measures are confined within the domain of patriarchy. Participation of women can, not only contribute in conflict resolution and peace process; it has immense potential to expand and consolidate the democratic politics in the North-East.

The paper, "Arunachal Pradesh: More than a Resting Place for 'Rebel Armies'" by Wasbir Hussain, is an attempt to bring to light the fact that Arunachal Pradesh can no more be termed as an

island of peace, and today, the state is more than a resting place for some of the most dreaded secessionist rebel armies of the region, although, it is unlikely that outfits outside Arunachal Pradesh can in the long run succeed in dictating terms to the locals in the state. The urgency to equip and train the state police to deal with the situation is the need of the hour. Moreover, the situation is becoming increasingly complex and the days ahead could well explode the myth that Arunachal Pradesh is among the peaceful states in the otherwise troubled North-East.

Gautam Chakma's paper "Natives Vs. Chakma Diaspora in Arunachal Pradesh," portrays and examines the intricate relationship between the natives and the Chakma diaspora in Arunachal Pradesh. It is an attempt to emphasise and point out the positive effects that migrants bring into the host society by way of augmentation of human capital for economic development. The human civilisation can flourish only if there is a synthesis between the natives and the migrants. All this while migrants have been considered a threat to the host society and its culture. But there is also a different side of the story, which has been ignored altogether. When the migrants come they bring with them their indigenous skills and labour, thereby contributing towards enhancement of human capital, which in turn contributes towards the state capital. One needs to rethink the entire given discourse of migration and identity crisis.

Anindita Dasgupta's research paper, "The War was in My Backyard ... Civilians and The New Insecurity in Conflict Zones of Assam," based on a participatory research project, aims at situating the civilian's insecurity in conflict afflicted district of Nalbari, Assam, consequent to the unabated fighting between armed forces and militant groups. The groups use small arms which are widely accessible to them throughout the area. In a situation of all pervasive fear of armed violence among the local communities, the conventional state-military centric security discourse is unlikely to resolve the conflict or bring peace and security to the people. She asserts that only human security should be the core of the state policy in negotiating with the problem of ethnic conflicts and the resultant violence and fear. She concludes that sustainable and equitable development is essential in order to ensure enduring human security free from violence and conflict.

Bhagat Oinam, in his paper "Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict in Manipur: Towards a Proposal for Solution," attempts a solution to the ethnic conflicts in Manipur, as well as in the rest of the region. Perhaps the most significant distinction that can be drawn between the ethnic conflicts in Manipur and elsewhere in the region is that of its semi-causal connectives. Subscribing to any solution to the conflicts, one has to take note of two factors determining the process of conflicts in the state, viz., the mode of development of collective consciousness in various tribes/communities and the 'land' as the material factor. Though these factors are common to almost all the conflicts in the region, the uniqueness of Manipur lies in the continuity of these conflicts either in isolation or through a chain. Collective consciousness emerges in the tribes (Naga, Kuki, Paite etc.) through formation of separate political identities. However, apart from the usual methods, a more meaningful effort lies in looking out for those particular material conditions, enhancement of which will create a conducive atmosphere so that each group realises the necessity of mutual coexistence. Development of communication system along with trade relations and creating economic interdependence can act as great boosters. But above all, the state machinery needs to be more effective, transparent and accountable. State malfunctioning is the cause of ethnic conflicts to a large extent, asserts Oinam, and the need to revive the state is urgent.

In his paper, "Kuki-Naga Conflict: Issues and Solutions," T.T. Haokip describes the Naga-Kuki conflict in Manipur. According to him, the three communities, viz., Naga, Kuki and Maitei used to have traditional feeling of oneness which is slowly disappearing by time. Kukis were in power in almost all the hill areas of Manipur from the 18th century onwards and controlled the neighbouring Naga villages. Taking advantage of tribal feuds, the British used the Kukis to fight against the Nagas. Coming to the question of identity and ownership of land with reference to Sadar Hills and the movement for Greater Nagaland and Kukiland, the author feels that in the Naga-Kuki conflict the major victims are the smaller tribes of the hills of Manipur who now face a severe crisis of their identity. The process of ethnic cleansing of the Kukis by the Nagas have led to the massive displacement of population since 1992. The author opines that the government is apathetic towards the problems of the internally displaced population (IDP)

in Manipur and even towards the Kuki crisis. As a solution to the Naga-Kuki conflict, Haokip recommends the redrawing of maps of the districts on the basis of ethnic composition. To him a well-defined ethnic territory is a precondition for resolving ethnic conflicts in Manipur.

Sajal Nag in his paper, "Turmoil in the Abode of Clouds: Ethnic Conflict in Meghalaya's Khasi Hills," analyses the present scenario in North-East India, which has been a cauldron of conflict and violence. The region has experienced unending conflicts of almost all typologies viz., communal, ethnic, linguistic, casteistic and so on. He scrutinises a particular type of conflict that has been a part of North-East India for a long time, viz., conflict between tribals and non-tribals. In this conflict, tribals are mobilised as one homogenous collectivity, in spite of their inner contradictions, against the non-tribals. On the other hand, the non-tribals are being categorised as one homogenous group ignoring their regional, linguistic, religious and caste differences. The conflict between these two groups in Meghalaya has been a prolonged one which emerged for the first time in 1979 as a ramification of the anti-foreign national movement in Assam. Since then, it has become endemic and increasingly brutal. In analytical terms, this conflict can be conceptualised as ethnic conflict because of the fact that there is no academic category such as tribals and non-tribals and moreover, the basis of mobilisation has been ethnicity.

"Towards a Resolution of Naga Issue," a paper by Udayon Mishra, emphasises the involvement of the civil society in resolving, state-people conflict in North-East India. The author attempts to highlight the history of peace initiatives taken up by the Government of India starting from 1964. The Peace Mission of September 1964 is the first major civil society attempt to bring peace in Nagaland. Even today, the civil society organisations based on traditional power structure have come to play a significant role in resolving the Naga issue rather than any alternate power structure. The author opines that durable peace is linked with the land, cultural autonomy and political freedom. Involvement of civil society organisations both within and outside the state of Nagaland is significant for finding an acceptable solution to the Naga imbroglio.

In his paper, "Fifty-Four Year Indo-Naga Conflict: India's Internal Ethnic Conflict or A Conflict Between Two Nations",

Kaka D. Iralu attempts to develop a conceptual understanding of the word ethnic identity and national identity in relation to Nagaland and India. While briefing the history of how different and even diverse ethnic identities merged into modern nation state, he finally traces the development of the concept of modern nation state as it developed in Nagaland and India in the 20th century. The paper ends with a strong and vocal argument that the Nagas strongly believe that their lands and their rights have been suppressed by India and Myanmar for over half a century.

Subir Bhaumik's vocal argument in his paper, "Tripura: Decommissioning of Gumti Hydel Project Crucial for Conflict Resolution," focuses on the plight of the tribal people of Tripura who are being land alienated, thereby dispossessing them of their prime and only economic resource and their collective symbol, viz., the land. The author comes up with a strong argument of decommissioning of the dam and thus clarifies his stand on the argument that once the task of decommissioning is over, the indigenous groups can be rehabilitated back to their own land. This step will also act as a catalyst in combating the problem of insurgency in the locality. In resolving ethnic conflict, the question of land needs to be addressed.

In addition to fifteen papers in this volume, we have added the recommendations made by the regional conference organised by the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Colombo, held in Kathmandu, Nepal from 11th-13th September 2004 on the Role of the Civil Society in the Prevention of Armed Conflicts: An Action Agenda for South Asia as an appendix. We feel these recommendations are crucial for civil society engagement in the prevention of armed conflicts in South Asia. Needless to say that some of these recommendations are highly relevant for prevention and resolution of violent conflicts in North-East India.

Though we find some commonality among the ethnic movements that emerged during the post-colonial phase in the various states of the North-East, each movement has its own specificities and dynamics. We need to situate these movements in their socio-historical context, understand their complexities and their social transition from one historical stage to another. Such transitions have been, indeed, very painful for the various ethnic groups living in the North-East. Conflict and its resultant violence has been an inseparable part of such painful transition. Many a times the

response of the state, instead of decreasing violence, accentuated violence in the North-East. The state itself has made many conflicts intractable by its own actions.

It seems both the state and the insurgents are not sensitive enough to the prolonged sufferings of the common people living in the conflict ridden region. The non-combatant civilians have, like in other conflict prone regions, suffered immensely in the crossfire between the state and the insurgents. Not only the insurgents used violent methods against the state, they also used it against the people whom they claim to represent and liberate. Similarly, the state too responded many a times violently not only against the insurgents but also against the innocent non-combatant civilians/citizens whom it is supposed to protect. Hence, we see that the people of North-East India have suffered immensely in the conflict between the mighty Indian state and the small group of insurgents fighting against the Indian state. It is necessary to situate the sufferings of the people/humans/citizens as the major concern of any agenda for conflict resolution and peace in the North-East. If the parties engaged in conflict realise the gravity of "sufferings" and their consequent insecurity, they will be able to search ways for "disengagement" and means for resolving conflict and building peace. Exploration for peace must begin with the "people" at the centre.

Once violence gets institutionalised and becomes all pervasive, resolving conflict and bringing back peace becomes difficult. North-East is also no exception to this trend. It is obviously, now very difficult to resolve conflict and ensure peace in the region. However, notwithstanding the grim and the pathos of past and the present propelled by conflict, I would like to assert that resolving the ethnic conflict and building peace is still within the orbit of possibility. Disputants — the state and the insurgents have unmistakably proved time and again that they both are not equipped adequately to resolve conflicts because of their own inherent contradictions, their power and weakness. Hence, the civil society initiative is a must in resolving the conflict and building durable peace in the North-East.

Now the question is: "Where is the civil society?" "How is the civil society in the North-East?" "Is it adequately prepared and equipped to resolve conflict and pave the way for peace?" These are of course very difficult questions to answer. Very similar to its

unevenness in socio-economic and political development within the North-East, the growth and consolidation of civil society has remained uneven within the region, and even within the states. For instance, relatively speaking, Assam perhaps, has a stronger civil society than the rest of the North-Eastern states. But within the state of Assam, the civil society is perhaps stronger in the Brahmaputra valley than in the hill areas of the same state. Similar is the equation in the non-tribal and tribal areas.

Earlier it was assumed that intense and sustained struggle for self-determination would give birth to a strong civil society. However, while making a plea for reconstructing the civil society in the North-East, Samir Das has emphatically pointed out that left to themselves the struggle for self-determination is unlikely to give birth to a viable and vibrant civil society. By and large, the civil society in the North-East has remained somewhat weak and unable to attain maturity. Nevertheless, it is growing gradually all over the region. This is a very positive development.

What do we do in a situation wherein the civil society in the modern sense is weak? Udayon Misra points out that civil society initiative may come from the traditional power structure and institutions, the way it is coming up and evolving itself very seriously in resolving conflict and building peace in Nagaland. In the absence of a modern vibrant civil society, it is obviously possible to engage even traditional religious institutions like *Satras*, *Jamats* of mosques, Churches, community institutions etc., in the peace process. However, the involvement of educational institutions, mass media, literary organisations, NGOs and various women organisations in resolving conflict and building peace in the region also needs to be emphasised. All it needs is an all inclusive civil society initiative. Besides being the conscience keeper of the society/community/citizens with a democratic compass, it does act as a watchdog of the activities of the two major actors engaged in conflict and can mediate between them simultaneously. However, we must guard ourselves against placing too much of primacy to the civil society initiative alone. In order to sustain peace, it is also of utmost importance to address the structural conditions that have given birth to frustration and violence in North-East India.